

Atlanta Symphony lockout enters third week

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As the lockout of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra musicians entered its third week, ASO management announced the cancellation of the first seven weeks of the orchestra's season, from September 25 through November 8.

The announcement by orchestra chief executive Stanley Romanstein underscores management's refusal to talk to the musicians, and amounts to a demand for unconditional surrender. After forcing musicians to accept pay cuts of 15 percent and a reduction in the size of the orchestra from 95 to 88 following a month-long lockout two years ago, management is refusing to budge from demands for new concessions, including major givebacks on health care coverage.

Romanstein issued a statement dripping with hypocrisy. "We've made this decision with a great deal of reluctance," he declared. "Canceling concerts is the last thing any of us wants to do, but out of respect for our patrons and the many people who play a role in producing the concerts we all enjoy, we feel we have no other choice."

This is the second lockout in a row for the Atlanta Symphony, and there is every indication that it will last longer than the one that took place in 2012.

In the face of management's hard line, ASO music director Robert Spano took the unusual step on Tuesday of publicly expressing his support for the musicians. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Spano said, "This is a dire and critical juncture for the city of Atlanta, which is in danger of losing the flagship of its culture. If the 10th largest urban economy in America is incapable of sustaining its cultural jewel, what does that signal about our country?...our brilliant and creative musicians have been asked to leave the building—and Atlanta is left with a deafening silence."

Spano also revealed, in a disclosure that was sure to provoke discussion, that he had personally helped to cover the costs of the orchestra's appearance at New

York's Carnegie Hall last May, when it performed Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*.

This was part of a tour, and the executives of the orchestra were moving to cancel it, "at which point I marched in to one of our symphony board meetings and said this is not going to be canceled—there are people who think it should be canceled, I don't agree with them, I'm putting \$50,000 on the table right now," Spano recounted. "Who's going to join me? I then started calling people all over the country, and we garnered the support for that engagement within a week."

Spano's careful declaration of sympathy with the musicians follows a somewhat more direct statement from principal guest conductor Donald Runnicles, who told the *Guardian* that the lockout was "a one-sided attempt to force the orchestra to its collective knees." Runnicles said the musicians had "shown extraordinary willingness to come to a common agreement...The fact that it should have come to a lockout again is simply devastating."

Spano also explained the significance of management's demands for complete control over the size of the orchestra. It was reduced in the last contract to 88, but departures have further reduced it to 80, and now management wants control over whether to fill positions. What this would mean in practice is that certain works that call for 90 or more musicians would force the orchestra to rely heavily on substitutes. Even though substitutes might be excellent musicians, the fact that they would be brought in for just several concerts would inevitably affect the quality of the performances.

The reduction in the size of the orchestra would also affect it in many other ways, said Spano, "not only for repertoire reasons but for health reasons and workload reasons and for engagement reasons—what you're able to do outside the hall, in the community."

It was also reported this week that one of the symphony board members had tried to end the lockout by raising pledges to meet the orchestra's deficit, but had resigned from the board after Romanstein and his associates refused to go along. "We've been trying short-term fixes for more than a decade without success," said a management spokesman. "We need a long-term solution that will allow the ASO to balance its artistic and financial goals."

While the lockout is only weeks old, the situation in Atlanta is already beginning to resemble the long stalemate that took place in Minneapolis, where a 16-month lockout finally ended last February. In that case, music director Osmo Vanska resigned when the lockout passed its first anniversary, and returned to his post after the lockout only on the condition that the orchestra CEO who had led the attack on the musicians resign.

The growing outspokenness of leading musical figures in the face of the corporate assault on major cultural institutions is significant. There is an increasing willingness to challenge the reactionary multimillionaires who seek to dictate the conditions under which great music will be heard.

At the same time, Spano's question—"what does that signal about our country?"—still awaits an answer. The relentless onslaught on culture and on the creative professionals responsible for "sustaining these cultural jewels" cannot be answered with appeals to common sense or people of good will. Nor can the problems be solved by emergency fund-raising of the kind that Spano carried out earlier this year.

The crisis is a political one. The symphonic tradition must not be held hostage to the whims and dictates of the wealthy. Public financial support in the form of massive subsidies for every genre of music must be forthcoming, but this will not happen spontaneously. The stranglehold of the super-rich, over culture as in every other sphere of life, has to be broken by the independent struggle of the working class.



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